

Incredible India

Kashmir
everlasting





Kashmir, known for its pristine beauty, snow-clad Himalayan peaks, flushing meadows, gurgling brooks, and cascading waterfalls, besides being an attraction for tourists world over, has been an abode of Sufi saints for centuries.

The Valley of Kashmir is known for being the 'Pir Vaer' or the 'Alcove of Sufis and Saints'. The Sufi shrines dotting Kashmir's landscape explain their importance to Kashmir's culture, social fabric and rich tradition of spirituality.

The great religions including Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, all flourished in Kashmir. Buddhists of Ladakh, Hindus of Jammu, and Hindus of Kashmir (better known as Kashmiri Pandits) and Muslims of the Valley besides Sikhs and Christians have lived in co-existence over the years.

Koh-e-Maran Fort

The city's hawk-eye view can be seen from the Koh-e-Maran (the Hari Parbat) Fort, which lies in the center of the city. The fort overlooking Srinagar City at the top of a hillock is a silent spectator to the vicissitudes of Kashmir history. Emperor Akbar constructed the first fortifications on the site in 1590. Afghan Governor Atta Muhammad Khan built the present fort between 1808 and 1819 under the reign of Shuja Shah Durrani on top of the hill. From the fort, a visitor can also have the breathtaking view of the Dal Lake on one side, and the Nigeen Lake on the other, besides most of the Srinagar City.





Dal Lake

Dal Lake, often referred as the 'Jewel in the crown of Kashmir' is world famous and integral to tourism and recreation in Kashmir.

Visitors can enjoy a stay inside the Dal Lake in Kashmir's indigenous houseboats made of cedar wood, having intricately carved wood paneling. For many tourists, the charm of staying on a houseboat is enough to drive them to the Valley.

Early in the mornings, a visitor to the Dal Lake can enjoy a ride in a colorful Shikara through the lake's floating gardens, known as 'Rad' in Kashmiri, where the lake dwellers sell fresh vegetables at throwaway prices. The floating gardens blossom with lotus flowers during July and August.

The lake's 15.5 km shoreline is encompassed by a Boulevard (or the boat road) and is lined with Mughal gardens including Nishat Bagh and Shalimar Bagh built by Mughal emperor Jahangir.



Nigeen Lake

Leading from the Dal Lake is the smaller Nigeen Lake. Willow and poplar trees flank the edges of the lake whose reflection is mirrored in the lake. Nigeen is a nice getaway from the chaotic city life. The Nigeen Lake's surroundings are more serene and isolated than Dal Lake's. Nigeen Club, on the banks of the lake, is a nice place to relax and socialize. The club has a tea pavilion and the view of the lake from the club's lawn is breathtaking. Boat Club at Pulwama on the banks of the lake is another attraction for the visitors.

Mughal Gardens

The celebrated Mughal gardens of Kashmir owe their grandeur primarily to Emperor Jahangir who had an undaunted love for Kashmir, and his son Shah Jahan. Jahangir was responsible for the careful selection of the site and maneuvering it to suit the requirements of the traditional paradise gardens.

Mughal emperors were fond of gardens and Kashmir to them served as a favorite destination, endowed with unsurpassed natural beauty. Mughals used to call Kashmir as Baag-i-Khasa, (Garden of Elites), where they used to come for recreation and enjoyment. They built 700 gardens for this purpose.

Most of the gardens in the city were laid out around Dal Lake and in the vicinity of the city.

The gardens and wider landscape settings are outstanding examples of the Mughal-type of architectural and landscaping ensembles in a mountainous environment.

The gardens are directly associated with the Mughal period in Kashmir and are a testimony to the flamboyant lifestyle of the Mughal Empire, which flourished in India between the early 16th and mid 19th centuries.

In Kashmir, Mughal gardens assumed a less formal and more natural appearance, with tall trees and shrubs and architecture hidden within the garden rather than dominating it as was the case with the more formal gardens of Delhi and Agra.

The world famous gardens like Nishat Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, Harwan, Chashmai Shai, Verinag, Achabal, and Naseem Bagh added a new dimension to Kashmiri architecture.

These gardens, created as integral art pieces within the unique character and context of the Kashmir valley, are seen as masterpieces of mountainside type Mughal Gardens.

Although the Mughals never deviated drastically from the original form or concept of the gardens, their biggest challenge in Kashmir was to exploit the chosen site and the abundance of water resource to its maximum potential. The sites selected were invariably at the foot of a mountain, wherever there was a source of water either in the form of streams or springs. This feature eventually resulted in terraced garden layouts. Undaunted by the challenges offered by mountainous terrain, the Mughal engineering skills and aesthetics helped in exploiting the dominating natural landscape and the available water resources to their maximum potential and achieved an unparalleled height of perfection.

Almost all popular Mughal gardens in Kashmir except Verinag follow a similar pattern with a central water channel sourced at natural springs. Avenues of poplars or Chinar trees further enhanced this channel, which formed the central visual axis of the garden. There are one or more baradaris or pavilions with a central open space 'dalan' placed over these water channels. These water channels cascade down from one terrace to another in the form of chadars or falls, where they fill in the larger water tanks, hauz, squarish in form and having an array of fountains. Finally, the water from the central channel joins a water body, either a flowing stream nearby.

The six Mughal Gardens in Kashmir can be seen as an integral part of the Kashmir cultural landscape and particularly in the case of the four gardens in Srinagar, they also form an integral part of the wider urban landscape of the city and Dal Lake.

Mughals came to Kashmir with the advent of Islam. Before Islam, Kashmir saw eras of Buddhism and Hinduism.





Buddhist Era in Kashmir

With the Kushans came the golden age of Buddhism in Kashmir. The great Kushan ruler Kanishka held the Fourth Buddhist Council at Harwan near Srinagar in the first century of the Christian era. Scholars and learned monks converged at Harwan and stayed for six months to discuss and interpret sacred Buddhist texts. This was one of the greatest meetings of Buddhist intellectuals the world had seen.

One of the earliest Buddhist architectural sites is on a picturesque slope of the Zabarwan mountain range at Harwan. Another significant site of Buddhist architecture is at Ushkar near Baramulla.

These excavations have found the first pre-Christian era fragments of terracotta and buildings. The Ushkar findings display all features of later Gandhara art.

These are followed by the Brahminical images showing the transition between classical Gandhara and Kashmiri sculpture.

The sun temple at Martand is the best representation of this glorious period.

The temple is 40 feet high from the ground level, has a central edifice, with a wing on each side of its entrance. It is built over a quadrangle plinth with a colonnade of fluted pillars with intervening trefoil-headed recesses. Eight lofty columns are still erect at the site. It had three gateways opening into the court. The central building is 63 feet in length and 36 feet in width.

The architects summarize that its roof may have been pyramidal in form.

Lalitaditya built his capital city at Parihaspora, which even in its present ruined condition bears witness to the grandeur of this king.

Parihaspora, 22 km from Srinagar near Pattan town, is one of the most remarkable, perhaps the most awe-inspiring monument of Lalitaditya's reign. Parihaspora is spread over the entire plateau. The great city of the East was destroyed in the 9th century by a Hindu king Shnakervermana. According to Kalhana, he plundered the great city and built a new city, now called Pattan, out of the massive stones of Parihaspora.

Parihaspora is now called 'Kanyi Shahar', 'The city of stones' by the local people.

The ruins of this great historical place are relics of the glorious past of Kashmir.

Lalitaditya had an ardent enthusiasm for constructing monuments. The monuments of the king speak of his insight, vision and architectural zeal.

Avantivarman (855-883 AD) was another great builder.

The temples at Avantipora are a fine example of the architectural achievements of this period.

A splendid Buddhist architectural marvel is found on the Bhuteshwara slope of the Harmukh mountain range in the Sindh valley. Over 5 km from Wangat, we find a cluster of temples, mute witness of the Buddhist era in Kashmir. Far from human habitation, at the end of a secluded narrow valley, Wangat temples are surrounded by dense forest. The average distance between the temples is about 300 feet. Each temple, now in ruins, is remarkable for its tri-foiled arches of the lateral porches.

Gopadary is yet another significant religious monument of the Buddhist era. Built on a loft precipice of the Zabarwan mountain in the southern shore of the Dal lake, this temple, according to Kalhana's Rajatarangini, was constructed by Gopaditya in 370 BC. After the fall of Buddhism in the 9th century AD, this Buddhist temple was converted into a Hindu Temple and dedicated to Jyeshthesvara. The temple is now called Shankaeracharya.

The structure contains a 100 square feet quadrangular enclosure over a 20 feet high plinth. The 24 square feet temple is at the center. There is a beautiful flight of steps that leads to its arched gate.

Buddhism continued to mark its presence as late as the 13th century.

Buddhism showed signs of decline in the ninth century AD when the mighty king of Kashmir Avantivarman showed respect to great Sanskrit scholars and creative writers and gave them high status in his court.





Start of the Hindu Era

The king was influenced by Shaivism and built many temples throughout the territory under his rule. He built a great center of Shaivist philosophy at Ishber on the foothills of the Zabarwan on the eastern shore of the Dal Lake..

The spring at Ishber is called Gupt Ganga, which is considered as a place of pilgrimage for Hindus.

King Avantivarman ruled the kingdom of Kashmir from 855 to 883 AD. The period of his rule are remembered as the period of stability, peace, prosperity and advancement of learning.

The great monuments at Awantipore are reminiscent of this period of glory. It is a period that the learned Brahmins migrated from India, settled in Kashmir, and made extraordinary contributions to philosophy, grammar, aesthetics, medicine and astrology. The town of Awantipore, was their meeting place.

The well-decorated colossal pillars in rows formed the outer wall of the enclosure. The actual temple on a raised quadrangular pedestal stood loftily at the center. The colonnades of massive and graceful pillars protected the cells in their rear.

At the entrance stands a huge monolithic pillar that supported a metal icon of Garuda the emblem of god Vishnu.

The great rectangular water-store made of slabs of stone added to the beauty of the central temple.

The engravings on the pillars, cornices, walls and trefoil arches show surprising variety of designs and figures. These engravings represent a harmonious blend of emblems of many cultures – Indian, Greek and Byzantine.

Avantishwara temple is another architectural feat of Avantivarman. The ruins of the temple stand near Awantipore, on the right side of the River Jhelum. This temple seems to have been larger than Avantiswami temple, but does not show the delicacies of engravings found in the former temple. This temple seems to have been built for the general masses.

Avantivarman's son Shankarvarman constructed the temples at Pattan. He ransacked the great capital of Buddhist monarch Lalitaditya and used the massive stones in his newly constructed Vishnu temples at Pattan.

Didda Rani, the queen of Khemagupta of Lohara dynasty ruled the kingdom of Kashmir from 980 to 1003 AD.

There are numerous temples of the last phase of Hindu rule found almost in every nook and corner of the Valley.

The temples of Kashmir had a very distinctive architectural style combining traditional Indian elements with architectural motifs from Gandhara and Persia, which were in turn influenced by Greek architecture. The architecture of these temples reminds one of the glorious days when Kashmir was on a major artery of the Silk Route and the breezes of many lands blew freely through the Valley.



Advent of Islam

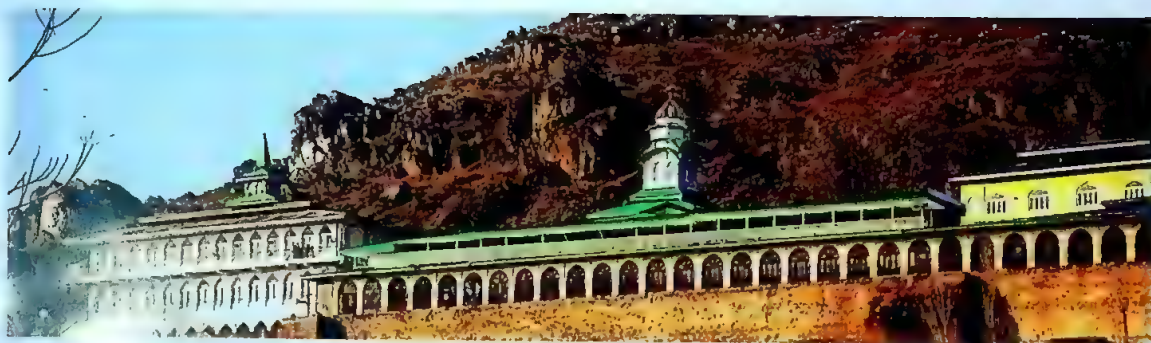
The advent of Islam in the 14th century brought a new dimension to the culture and heritage of Kashmir. The Salatin of Kashmir, the first Muslim king, had a penchant for decorative arts and crafts. Scholars and traders from the cultural centers of Asia such as Herat, Merv, Samarqand and Bukhara came in substantial numbers to Srinagar, which was then known as Shehar-i-Kashmir. Their arrival influenced the rich craft traditions of Kashmir. Sultan Zainul Abidin, popularly called Budshah (1420-1470 AD) patronized arts, crafts, literature and architecture and left behind a legacy unsurpassed by any other king. This period gave birth to the use of colors, motifs and techniques that were henceforth to dominate Kashmiri crafts. The craft heritage of Kashmir, especially its textiles, has been declared along with miniature paintings as the most significant art form of India.



Bulbul Lankar Shrine

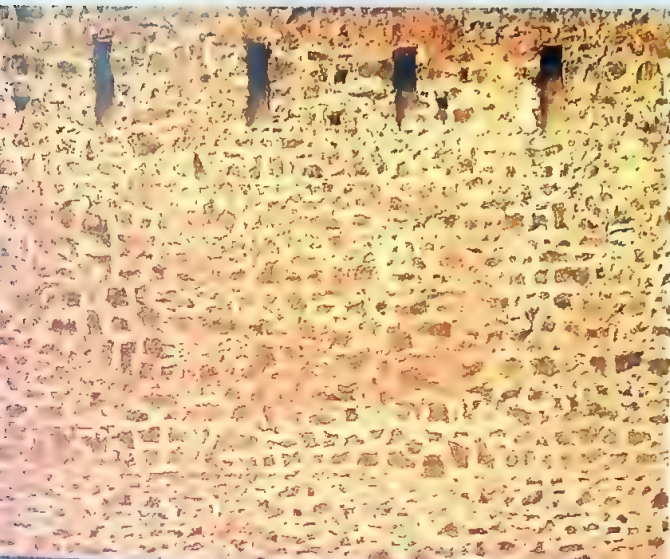
The mosque and the shrine of Bulbul Lankar is the first Muslim architectural monument in Kashmir. With the establishment of Shahmiri rule, numerous mosques, shrines, and Khanqahas (hospices) were constructed in every village and town of Kashmir.

The advent of Islam introduced the best of the Central Asian architectural designs and when combined with local traditions, produced an architectural style that is distinct in all respects.



Sahab shrine

The Koh-e-Maran Fort built by Mughals, is Makdooom Sahab shrine, a double-storied, many-arched structure. Considered one of the most sacred shrines in Kashmir, it is visited not only by Muslims but also by people from other faiths. The shrine named after Hazrat Hamza Makhdoom, also called Mehboob-ul-Millat, was a sage born in 1494 AD to the family hailing from Tujar Shareef area of north Kashmir. He was a hereditary landlord, a scholar and a Sufi Muslim saint of high order who lived upto 1563 AD. Makhdoom Sahab, with his religious and social message, became popular among Kashmiris. To this day, hundreds of devotees pay obeisance at his shrine climbing the flight of stone steps.



Nagar Nagar Kalayee

The construction on the Nagar Nagar Kalayee or the rampart wall was started in 1597 and completed in 1606 by emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, when there was a famine in the city. The Mughal emperor paid the famine stricken people for labor work. He planned a new capital called Nagar Nagar to be built within the wall but the project was never completed. Kashmir's biggest correctional facility, Central Jail, lies just outside the Nagar Nagar Kalayee.



Kathi Darwaza

Assumed to be the main entrance in the outer wall around the historical Mughal Fort from Rainawari side, Kathi Darwaza was built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in year 1590. Kathi Darwaza is a very simple structure with a domed chamber in the center and two recesses in the sides. It has Persian commemorative inscriptions on its walls and ceilings. These inscriptions throw light on the Persian beliefs and culture.

Gurdwara Chatti Pattshahi

Located just outside the Kathi Darwaza is Gurdwara Chatti Pattshahi. It represents a distinct religious identity of Sikhism in Kashmir. Peace fills the place and the echoes of faith resonate across the mountains that surround the Gurudwara. This historic Gurdwara is named after the sixth Sikh Guru, Shri Guru Hargobind Singh Ji.

The Gurdwara is spread out in a semi-circle with the sanctum in the center. A wide, open, spacious terrace in front of the sanctum holds the image. A well nearby, believed to have healing power, was dug by Guru Hargobind Singh Ji.



Sharika Devi Temple

At the time of Harnavami, the birthday of Hindu goddess Sharika Devi, which usually falls in mid June to mid July, hundreds of devotees flock to the Sharika Devi Temple with nightlong singing of hymns in the praise of the goddess. Hindus regard the 18-armed goddess Sharika Devi as the presiding deity of Srinagar City. The idol of the goddess has circular mystic impressions in sandy rock and triangular patterns with a Bindu at the center. The deity is also called Chakreshwari.



Mullah Akhoun Shah Mosque

Situated at the foot of the Koh-e-Maran hillock is the 17th century Mosque of Akhoun Mullah Shah. The construction of the mosque was started in 1628 AD and completed in 1658 AD. The mosque, built of grey limestone, has a series of arched terraces perched on the slopes of the hill. It has a number of concealed chambers with arcades and voice synch domes all around. Jewels and mirrors were fitted in the walls to illuminate the whole place in the evenings.



Budshah Tomb

A casual stroll through the bylanes of archaic wholesale bazaar of Zaina Kadal, situated on the banks of River Jhelum in Mahara (Guj), one reaches the doorsteps of a masterpiece of King Zain ul Abidin's wisdom.

The imperial structure is normally referred by Zain ul Abidin alias Budshah, who ruled over this nation in that valley from 14-29 AD.



Badamvaer

Traditionally the daffodils and almond bloom mark the arrival of spring in Kashmir. People still get nostalgic and rejoice in festivities surrounding the bloom of Badamvaer, or the almond alcove, which lies on the banks of Nigeen Lake. Badamvaer offers a spectacle of color and celebrations. In the past families would carry a Samovar and water chestnuts to throng the garden and be part of the festivities.





Jamia Masjid

Jamia Masjid is the biggest and the main mosque in Kashmir. Situated in Nowbatta in the middle of Srinagar's old city, the mosque has a beautiful Indo-Saracenic architecture, a magnificent courtyard and the roof stands on 378 deodar pillars. Each pillar stands on a massive quadrangular and embellished limestone base.

The mosque has a perfect square garden in the middle and a fountain sprouts from a pond in the center of the garden. The peace and tranquility inside the mosque stands out against the hustle and bustle of the old bazaars around it. Jamia Masjid was built by Sultan Sikandar in 1400 AD and later extended by his son Zain-ul-Abidin. The area of Jamia Masjid now extends up to 384 feet by 384 feet.

Thousands of Muslims assemble every Friday to offer congregational prayers at the mosque where Kashmir's head priest, Mirwaiz, delivers the sermons. On the last Friday of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadhan, over 1 lakh faithful offer congregational prayers at Jamia Masjid.

The walls of the mosque are made of limestone and bricks are four feet thick and 30 feet high. It has four gates from different four sides. On each gate, there is a 50 feet high chamber with a pyramidal dome and spire. Its largest dome is over its Minbar toward west.







Khanqah-i-Mu'ala

Muslim architecture in Kashmir received tremendous impetus when numerous skilled artisans from various parts of Iran thronged Kashmir in the eighth decade of the 14th century. Hazrat Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, popularly known as Shah-i-Hamadan, paid his first visit to Kashmir in 1372. He was followed by 700 Sayyids who undertook propagation of Islam in every part of the country.

The best of all the features of Islamic aesthetic in architecture are found in complete harmony at Khanqah-i-Mu'ala. Sultan Sikander built the Khanqah or the Muslim hospice between 1389 and 1413. The Khanqah stands in its full splendor on the bank of the Jhelum between Zaina Kadal and Fateh Kadal in Srinagar. The original structure was destroyed in an accidental fire in 1731 and the present structure was built in 1732.

Khanqahi Mu'ala, commonly known as Shah Hamadan Mosque, is based on huge logs of deodar wood, and small bricks fill up the space between the logs. The arched gate is a splendid piece of art, rather a blend of several arts. All the doors and windows of the Khanqah present extremely sophisticated lattice work in arabesque designs. The ceiling bears several verses of the holy Quran in unparalleled calligraphic styles. The ceiling is itself the best of the art of wood panelling called 'Khatamband'. The octagonal colossal wooden pillars are also excellent specimen of floral woodcarving.

Madeen Sahab

The shrine of Sayyid Muhammad Madani or Madeen Sahab near Zadibal area of downtown is a protected monument. It is most remarkable in terms of antiquity of the original mosque construction in Kashmir. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin built the Masjid and Hamam in the shrine complex in 1444 AD in honor of his preceptor Sayyed Muhammad Madani. Archeological Survey of India renovated the shrine in 1984. This shrine was one of the most pre-Mughal structure carrying very distinct architectural features, including earthen roof. The monument is also famous for its glazed tile work. The plinth is made of very old limestone blocks. The intricate floral carving in its hexagonal asterisk doorway is a wonderful piece of art. Its sanctum is 10 feet square with Khatamband ceiling. The arched corridor leads to the grave of the Sufi saint. The date of its construction is given on the lintel of its main gate.





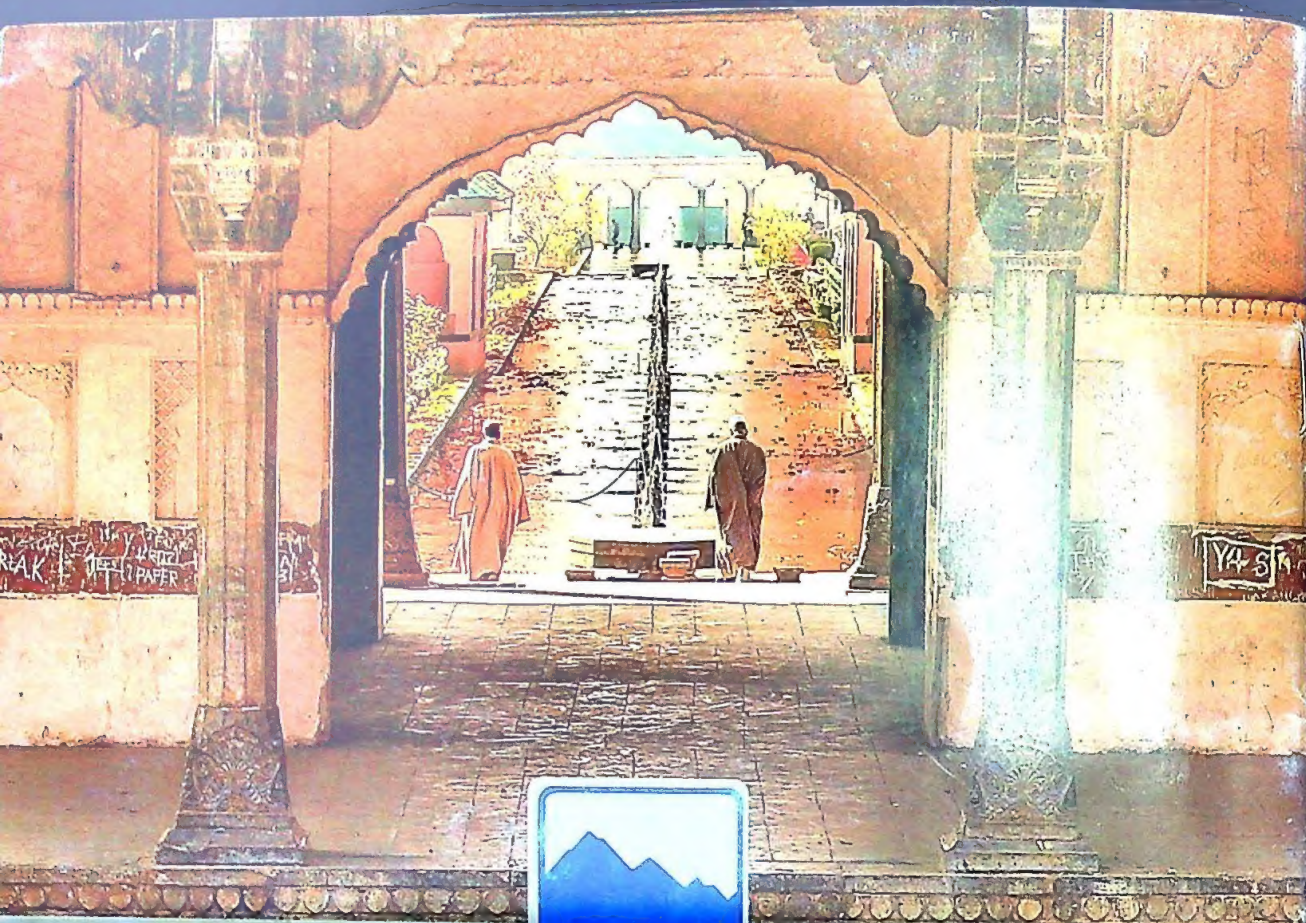


River Jhelum

As most civilizations are built on the banks of rivers, ours cannot be any different. Kashmir developed on the banks of River Jhelum. Jhelum is to Kashmir what Nile is to Egypt.

In the past, people in Kashmir used to take pleasure trips on the Dungas (a moving houseboat) in the Jhelum like the boat rides of tourists in Venice. This is why, Kashmir used to be referred to as the Venice of the East.

River Jhelum originates from Verinag Spring, situated at the foot of the Pir Panjal mountain range in the southeastern part of the Valley. It flows through Srinagar and the Wular Lake before entering Pakistan. The Neelum River, the largest tributary of the Jhelum, joins it, at Domel Muzaffarabad, as does the next largest, the Kunhar River of the Kaghan valley. The river is 725 km long and Kashmiris often refer to it as Vyeth. Its Sanskrit name is Vitasta while the ancient Greeks referred to it as Hydaspes.



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